

On the Future and Options

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Andrew Bacevich's defense of LTC Gian Gentile in October's *Atlantic*, while well intentioned, was both flawed and misguided. Concerns about the U.S. military's focus on counterinsurgency and stability operations at the expense of conventional war-fighting abilities are real and warrant a significant discussion on how to strike a balance between the two ends of the spectrum of conflict. However, Gentile's arguments that he defends drive that discussion to the extreme end of the spectrum and would leave the U.S. military few options to defend against the plethora of security challenges that face the nation today and in the future.

Gentile's main arguments are that too much credit has been given GEN David Petraeus for the change in strategy in Iraq, that the decline in violence in Iraq is primarily attributable to the United States buying the allegiance of the Sons of Iraq, and that the U.S. military focuses too much on counterinsurgency doctrine to the detriment of its high intensity warfare skills. A corollary to this last critique is that U.S. forces will likely not – and really should not – fight irregular-war conflicts in the future. Bacevich's article not only supported Gentile's ideas but also stated that those who disagreed with him, like LTC (R) John Nagl, were trying to mold the nation's fighting forces in order to continue to fight "one, two, many Iraqs to come."

Gentile argues in *World Affairs* that GEN Petraeus did not provide a new strategy during the surge and that he, LTC Gentile, had in fact been conducting effective counterinsurgency operations in 2004. While this may be true, though arguable as evidenced by Gentile's own writings, he ignores that the widespread policy implementation enacted by GEN Petraeus, in conjunction with the surge, is what caused the significant decline in violence in late 2007. These policies hinged on two major changes: focus on the population (as opposed to the enemy) and forcing Soldiers and Marines to live among the people in forward patrol bases. That Gentile's battalion may have been performing counterinsurgency doctrine in 2004 by no means suggests that other units in Iraq were. For example in 2005, my unit, the 2d Brigade Combat Team, 3d Infantry Division, was certainly not conducting doctrinally correct counterinsurgency operations in eastern Baghdad. The brigade was instead operating out of large forward operating bases with little regard to protecting the population. The brigade's decision to virtually ignore Sadr City was a major cause of Shia violence in 2006 because of the unit's failure to be among the people in 2005. This inaction allowed Moqtada al Sadr and his Mahdi Army to reequip and refit after his significant losses in 2004. By forcing all commands to get out among the population and focus on their security, GEN Petraeus helped turn the situation around.

Gentile, and Bacevich in his defense, misses the underpinning motivations of the Sons of Iraq and their effects on security. Gentile argues that the United States bribed the Sunni tribes in a “cash-for-cooperation” deal and that their bought loyalty is what caused the reduction in violence – not the surge or new strategies. However, the Awakening could not have happened without solid counterinsurgency tactics and strategy as implemented by GEN Petraeus. Iraqis would not have joined the movement if U.S. forces had not had patrol bases amongst the population. Only with the backing that the tactics and the additional U.S. presence provided was the Awakening possible at all - they were mutually dependent. Additionally, the "cash-for-cooperation" aspect of the movement was integral to its success. With the economic conditions that existed, Al Qaeda gained influence not just through intimidation, but by paying off the populace; specifically by paying for services such as VBIED drivers, IED emplacements, and local security. For a pittance, coalition forces reversed the population's allegiance against Al Qaeda and stimulated the economy. Bacevich and Gentile do not give enough credence to the economic motivations of individuals.

Bacevich and Gentile’s flawed reasoning in determining the effective reasons for the recent successes in Iraq portray a greater misunderstanding of the U.S. military’s mission now and what future missions will likely be. Bacevich and Gentile believe that the military should begin to drop counterinsurgency and stability operations from its training regimen or at a minimum significantly curtail it and refocus on high-intensity warfare tasks. To do so would be a grave error. If there is one lesson the world community learned from the invasion of Iraq, it is that the United States’ conventional warfare abilities are awesome and unmatched in the world. Therefore, states are unlikely to challenge these standard mechanisms of U.S. power. In addition, the United States is currently fighting two counterinsurgencies and the probability of more in the future is significant. Nagl is correct in stating that the greatest threats to the United States come from failed and failing states in which extremism would prosper in a vacuum devoid of legitimate government. One need look no further than Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan to see evidence of this.

Aggressor states are more likely to challenge U.S. hegemony through proxy and the fomentation of regional instability. Iran’s support of Hezbollah and their meddling in Lebanon are a great example of this. While it would be unwise to argue that the United States will never fight a conventional war again, it is unlikely in the near future. Bacevich and Gentile wish a return to the heady days of the Gulf War and the Powell Doctrine, but wishing it will not create the conditions that will allow a return to Cold War doctrine. Any attempt to doctrinally return to those days could prove disastrous for the United States.

Bacevich’s attack on those who support a solid counterinsurgency and stability operations doctrine is unfounded. Strategists like Nagl are attempting to give the U.S. military the skill sets it needs to accomplish the missions imposed upon it by Congress and the President, not to project an agenda of crusading throughout the Middle East. The military did not choose to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan – that choice is not the military’s to make. They were ordered to do so, leaving the Army to develop doctrine that would allow some modicum of success. The alternative was to continue floundering through two conflicts for which it was neither trained nor organized. Thankfully, the military’s leadership chose the former in order to allow U.S. forces the flexibility to succeed today and react to any threat in the future.

Jason Fritz served as a cavalry officer during three tours in Iraq. He was a tank platoon leader during the invasion, a troop executive officer during OIF III, and a brigade planner during OIF V. He is now a civilian, working and living in the Washington, D.C. area.

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